

Core Values

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Since assuming our respective roles as secretary of the Air Force and Air Force chief of staff, we both have traveled to numerous bases, meeting with officers and enlisted personnel at every level. Buffeted by events that are all too familiar to the readers of daily newspapers, we've seen challenges to our promotion system that raise issues of integrity. We've had tragic accidents that have raised issues of command leadership and accountability. We have called for and received extraordinary levels of operational/personnel tempos from our people to remind us that military service is not a job but a noble calling. Throughout this, we have become convinced of the need to continually articulate the core values of our institution.

The Air Force holds certain ideals, certain values, that are at the heart and soul of the military profession. Over the past few months, we've been in dialogue to refine and express the essence of these values and to distill these values into a small number of qualities. We have looked at these core values established by the Air Force as part of our quality initiative, as well as those adopted by the major commands, and we have distilled them into the following:

- Integrity first
- Service before self
- Excellence

Integrity, service, excellence—three simple words that epitomize the core of the military profession. The bedrock of integrity, fortified by service to country, which in turn fuels the drive for excellence must be introduced to our new members as they enter the service and must be reinforced throughout their careers.

Integrity is essential. It's the inner voice, the source of self-control, that is the basis for the trust that is imperative in today's military. It is doing the right thing when nobody is looking. In this world of "me first" and relative ethics, honesty is still the hallmark of the military professional. Service members must know the right thing to do and must have the moral fortitude to do it.

After the bedrock of integrity comes service before self. Military service is not just another job. It's an uncommon profession that calls for people of uncommon dedication. Every military member realizes from day one that his or her individual needs will be subordinated to the needs of the nation. The Air Force requires a high level of professional skill, a 24-hour-a-day commitment, and a willingness to make personal sacrifices. When people forget that basic tenet, careerism and self-interest can emerge—doing the most damage when displayed by the leader. A leader who is unwilling to sacrifice individual goals for the good of the unit cannot convince other unit members to do so. The mission suffers with potentially devastating effects. While personal goals often coincide with Air Force goals, there is no room for personal agendas at the expense of the institution or the American people.

This brings us to the third core value: excellence. In today's society, some people resign themselves to just getting by. Because we've been entrusted with our nation's security and a good portion of the national treasury—because our mission often involves the risk of human life and sometimes even national survival—because we are authorized to act on behalf of our entire society—the obligation to excel is a moral obligation for members of our professional military force. The line between incompetence and immorality is a thinner line in the military profession than in any other calling. For that reason, "Excellence in all we do" is not just a slogan; it is a first-line core value for every Air Force member.

Integrity first . . . service before self . . . excellence in all we do—our times call for a reminder of the core values of our institution, values that serve as a beacon towards the right path. They set the standard for our behavior, our service to country, and our treatment of one another. They ennoble us by reminding us of the importance of the profession we've chosen, the oath we've taken, and the demands placed upon us.

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